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SUBJECT: PM'S VATICAN VISIT TO BE FOLLOWED BY PAPAL VISIT TO  
VIETNAM, NORMALIZED RELATIONS?

REF: VATICAN 25

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#### SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's January 25 visit to the Vatican has elicited guarded optimism from Catholics and GVN officials alike that both sides are moving closer to normalizing diplomatic relations. Recent efforts by the GVN to upgrade an important shrine in southern Vietnam may indicate that they anticipate welcoming a Papal visit in the near future. For their part, Catholic officials in Vietnam think a Papal visit, even before formal relations are established, would "appropriately reciprocate" the PM's Vatican visit, and are working toward that goal. A possible next step is for a planned March Vatican delegation to Hanoi to lay the groundwork for a Papal visit in the near- to medium-term. Such a visit would help to further undergird recent progress in encouraging greater religious freedom in Vietnam, and we should continue to encourage the Vietnamese and the Vatican at all levels to make the visit happen. End Summary.

#### The PM's Vatican Visit

2. (SBU) Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung met January 25 with Pope Benedict XVI and Vatican Prime Minister Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone at the Vatican to "exchange political and religious views" (reftel). Dr. Do Quang Hung, Director of the influential GVN Academy of Social Science's Institute for Research on Religions, told Poloff shortly after this first-ever Politburo-level visit to the Vatican that the GVN and Vatican have been taking pragmatic steps to achieve full diplomatic relations in the three years since the Pope called for full normalization in his first foreign policy address. Increasingly high-ranking delegations have exchanged visits, including the ground-breaking visit of Cardinal Crescenzio Sepe to Hanoi in December 2005. The PM's visit should only be seen as another step forward in this process, Hung said. However, at a January 29 luncheon hosted by the Ambassador, Hanoi Archbishop Ngo Quang Kiet took a more optimistic view.

#### The Catholics' Perspective

3. (SBU) Kiet noted that conservatives in the Catholic Church had urged the Pope not to meet with Dung because of continued restrictions on the Vietnamese Church. Some conservative members of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) also opposed the meeting on the grounds that it might "signal Vietnam's obedience to the Vatican." However, most Vietnamese citizens, Catholic or otherwise, were pleased by the PM's visit. Extensive coverage of the meeting led

Vietnamese news programs for two days, Kiet added.

14. (SBU) Kiet stated that the meeting was entirely arranged by the GVN; however, the Vietnam Church's Episcopacy Council advised both the Vatican and the GVN that they were in favor of the idea. Last-minute objections from within the CPV were overcome because Vatican representatives (NFI) took the initiative to emphasize their interest in establishing formal relations with the GVN. This led to some speculation among Catholics that the meeting may make it possible to establish a Vatican liaison office in Hanoi, which overcame remaining objections within the Church. "Basically, both sides realized the opposite side was seriously considering establishing formal diplomatic relations," Kiet said.

15. (SBU) The Ambassador asked if the GVN has offered to return the former Papal Nuncio property adjacent to the Hanoi Cathedral. (Note: The Hanoi Archdiocese has sought to recover this property for use by the Episcopacy Council for some time. End Note.) Kiet said that the Church expects the Nuncio property will only be returned as part of the "full package" of established relations.

#### A Papal Visit in the Near Future?

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16. (SBU) The Ambassador asked what we should expect from the upcoming Vatican delegation to Hanoi in March. Kiet said that, "given the good results of the PM's meeting, we should expect new things in March." "It would be great if the USG continues to express to the Vietnamese support for establishing relations between the GVN and the Vatican," he added. The Ambassador noted rumors that the GVN has recently committed funds to upgrade the Our Lady of Lavang holy site in Quang Tri Province and asked if this indicated that a Papal visit is in the offing. Kiet confirmed that the GVN's National Tourism Administration has announced plans to invest in support infrastructure for the shrine. (Note: One stumbling block for a Papal visit has been the poor condition of the site, an important Marian precinct since the first apparition of the Lady of

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Lavang was noted in 1798 during a period of Catholic persecution. John Paul II announced his intention to visit Vietnam twice in the late 1990's and was rebuffed both times by the GVN on the grounds that the Lavang site "could not support his visit." The Religion Institute's Hung informed Poloff that the GVN has decided to quickly upgrade the site with a large tourist infrastructure investment. End Note.)

17. (SBU) Kiet further stated that, in his recent meetings with GVN officials, many senior leaders said "it is about time to invite the Pope to Vietnam." The Archbishop was careful to note, however, that these GVN officials may have been "overly optimistic" about the prospect of a visit in the near future. Nevertheless, Church leaders think that a Papal visit this year would appropriately reciprocate the PM's Vatican visit and could come before formal diplomatic relations are established. "It depends now mainly on what the GVN is willing to accept," Kiet added.

#### The GVN's View

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18. (SBU) On February 2, the MFA's Europe II Department Director Nguyen Manh Dzong briefed diplomats on the GVN's official assessment of the PM's Vatican visit. Dzong stated that during the meeting the Pope expressed his appreciation for the expansion of religious freedom policies and thanked the GVN for allowing the development of the religious life of the Catholic community in Vietnam. The Pope expressed happiness regarding the increase in the number of priests and churchgoers. Cardinal Bertone also told the PM that the Church considers Vietnam "an example of religious freedom," especially in the way it allows the combination of religious and social activities. Bertone told the PM that the GVN and the Vatican "need to try to go further to achieve full normalization." PM Dzong took note of the Pope's and Cardinal's suggestions and has instructed the MFA to discuss the details further, Director Dzong added.

19. (SBU) Regarding the Vatican delegation visit in March, Director

Dzung stated that "the visit is based on one of three points in a 1990 agreement between the Vatican and GVN," which established de facto relations between the two parties. Point three of the agreement establishes that there will be annual delegations from the Vatican, headed by the Vatican's Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs. The March visit should be seen in this framework; however, the visit will focus on developing GVN-Vatican relations, Dzung said. (Note: Point one of the agreement requires that the Church consult with the GVN regarding the nomination of bishops and priests in some localities. Point two establishes that neither side will use the media to spread propaganda against the other. End Note.)

¶10. (SBU) When pressed, Dzung stated that the PM will soon release a statement about normalization of relations with the Vatican; however, the PM will likely call for "adequate steps and goodwill on both sides." Director Dzung would not comment on the timing of normalization, but stated that "maybe in the framework of the March visit, there will be further meetings that will result in a definite timeframe." Concrete actions on the relationship will begin soon, as the PM only just gave the instruction to explore the issue, Dzung said.

#### Context for Normalization

¶11. (SBU) Dzung noted that the GVN's decision to normalize relations with the Vatican will be a wholly internal decision. It will not be influenced by China's relations with the Vatican, as the range of Vietnam-Vatican relations in the past is substantively different from Vatican-Chinese relations, not least because the Catholic community "still exists in Vietnam." As can be expected, normalization will result in an exchange of ambassadors. The GVN currently communicates with the Vatican through its ambassador in Rome. When in Hanoi, Vatican envoys meet with the VFM and Party Foreign Relations Commission, Dzung said.

#### Comment

¶12. (SBU) It is clear that the PM's visit to the Vatican was a major step forward in GVN-Vatican relations. Whether the visit sets the stage for a rapid normalization of relations between the two parties remains to be seen. Nevertheless, a possible next step is for the planned March Vatican delegation to Hanoi to lay the groundwork for a Papal visit to Vietnam, perhaps before the establishment of formal relations. Such a visit would be highly symbolic and would help cement the successes the international community has had in encouraging greater religious freedom in Vietnam. We should continue to encourage the Vietnamese and the Vatican at all levels to make the visit happen.

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